

# No health without planetary health

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## Health and planetary health – can the two be reconciled?

The World Health Organisation constitution was adopted in New York in 1946. It defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”[1]. Although not without critics, it was considered groundbreaking in its time for including mental and social domains, along with the physical, and for overcoming a negative definition of health as merely absence of disease. It has never been adapted in over 70 years.

Planetary health, by contrast, refers to “the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends”. On 16th July 2015, Judith Rodin, during her term as 12th President of the Rockefeller Foundation, helped launch the public call to declare Planetary Health a ‘new’ discipline, with the online publication of a special report – “Safeguarding Human Health in the Anthropocene Epoch”[2].



The Times, Monday 6<sup>th</sup> January 1969, reporting on the Apollo 8 flight round the moon. More than 50% of all greenhouse gas emissions have occurred since this image was published.

“Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken...”

From the sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', by John Keats, October 1816



The Anthropocene marks an era when, for the first time in 2,500 centuries of human evolution, the technological and industrial activities of a single surviving human species (of perhaps 20 or so others of the genus Homo that have not survived) have become the major determinant for the future direction of the biosphere and the myriad of other species it contains.

By contrast, the richness and diversity of nature supplies most of what it means to live full and enriched lives from aesthetics and beauty to life saving drugs[3]. The transformative solution required is recognition of the physical and natural environment as the source of all life when nurtured in harmony, not exploited to extinction in polluting ways. Human and all other living health is a PART of planetary health. A special transformative approach from health and care is that most solutions for long term climate health ALSO offer immediate well known, understood, practical health and well-being benefits (e.g. meaningful jobs, sustainable food, insulated houses, renewable energy, planned and welcome migration).

## Are our health systems healthy?

### Needs and wants are not always the same

Health service resources are currently often more focused on ‘fire fighting’ acute disease and managing urgent need in chronic disorders. Health is not just “the absence of disease”. A transition to a salutogenic, positive model of health, rather than a negative pathological, deficit concept, may be a better paradigm for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One can live with an illness and be healthy. One can also appear disease free but unwell (often mentally and spiritually). (SDG 3, 4, 12 and 17)



Workshop graphics created during 'Waking up to planetary health 2018' conference, RD&E Hospital, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2018

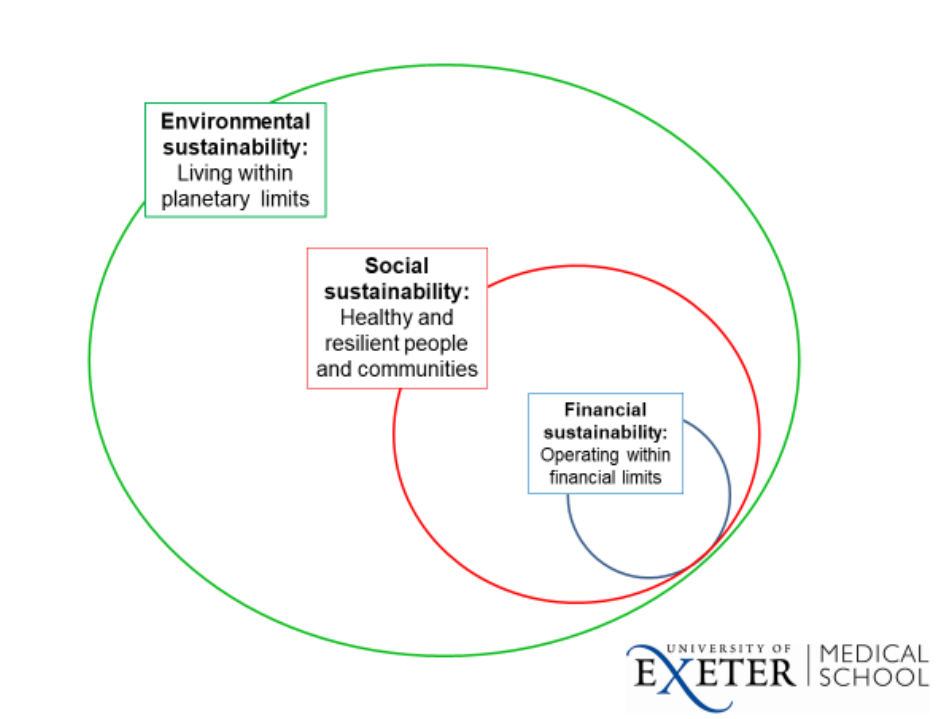
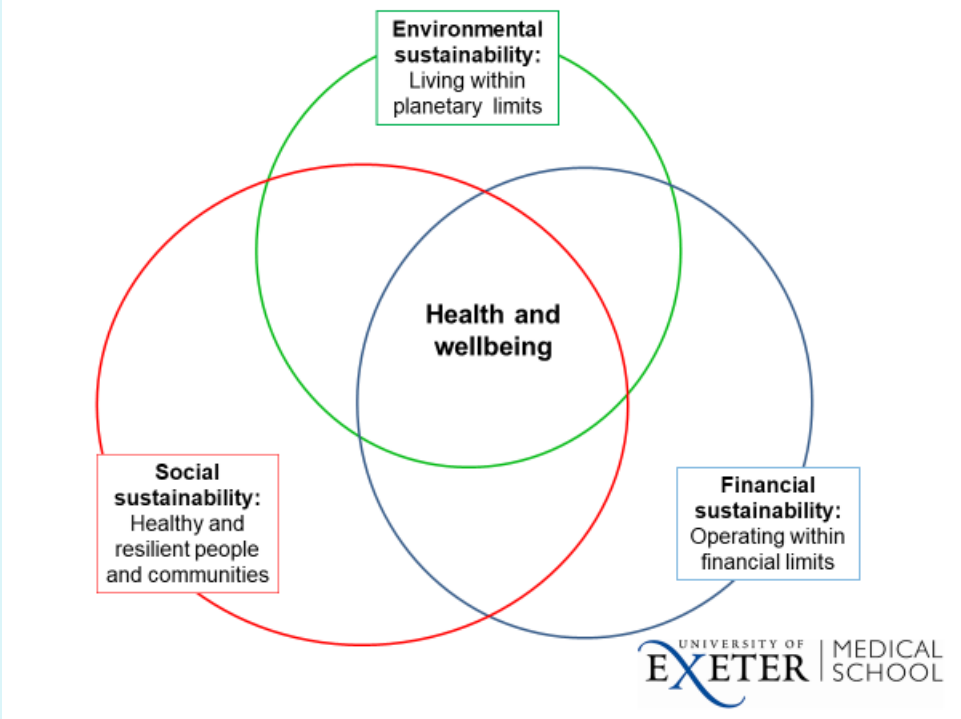
## References

[1] World Health Organization. Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June 1946; signed on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no.2, p.100) and entered into force on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

[2] "Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health" (2015) The Lancet 386:1973-2028 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015.

[3] Chivian E. Why doctors and their organisations must help tackle climate change: an essay by Eric Chivian (2014) BMJ 348:g2407.

For United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>



## Environmental services and human wellbeing – what sort of transformation do we need?

A re-evaluation of the principles of health, in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, combined with transforming the Triple Bottom Line approach of fundamental environmental service in the provision of food, water, breathable air, shelter, energy, etc. for human survival and wellbeing. (SDG 2, 6, 7 and 10)

Left, School Strike demonstration outside Devon County Council, Exeter, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2019

## Conclusions

- Health is a global system with extensive network reach across all human societies.
- Vital and urgent messages from complex transdisciplinary ventures may not always be understood as specifically relevant within a multidisciplinary arena.
- Clear direction and targeting in knowledge dissemination may reduce ambiguities in relevance, ownership and professional responsibility for action. (‘Right name and right postcode’ vs. a ‘To the occupier’ approach.)
- Language matters more than ever when communicating concepts around shared universal values and goals.
- Health has universal value within human society. Health as a goal commonly promotes investment from nearly all sectors.
- Planetary health is a **HEALTH EMERGENCY** and health professionals must understand it as such.